

9 Family Lives and Family Literacy Traditions

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This paper explores literacy traditions within the lives of three families. The narrative accounts of family members from three generations provided a retrospective view. I drew on my experiences as a teacher working with young children and their parents. The narratives of grandparents, parents and of three children form the core of the study. The role of family literacy is described; it is positioned in sharp relief alongside schooled literacy.

Introduction

I became interested in family literacy three years ago. The National Literacy Strategy had recently been implemented in schools. It seemed that the role of family literacy in the success of school literacy had been marginalised, albeit unwittingly, by government intervention in education. There was however widespread concern about standards in literacy. The focus of the research was three families whose children had attained high standards in literacy at primary school. I explored three aspects of family literacy. The first of these was the degree and nature of support that families provide for their children in their efforts to learn to read. The second issue related to the transmission of behaviours from one generation to the next. If parents or grandparents were encouraged and supported in their reading as children, would they do likewise for their own children because of these remembrances? The third and final issue was the notion that within some families a tradition of literacy is embedded in everyday family life and as such is passed on from one generation to the next.

Family Literacy

The social context of literacy learning at home was the setting for the enquiry. A biographical research method revealed narratives of children learning literacy within their families and how this was remembered within the three generations, grandparents, parents and children. Previous research (Taylor, 1983) and (Heath, 1994) has focused on interaction between parents and children, by describing the ways in which parents set about introducing their

children to the written text and encouraging them to read. These 'literacy traditions' and 'literacy events' (Street, 1995) include activities such as the reading of bedtime stories to children and telling a story from pictures. Some families engage in a core of activities that serve to support and encourage children to learn to read and write. The research looked beyond the foreground of 'what' happens to the interpretations by the participants of why events occurred. The inclusion of grandparents within the study provided a further dimension to the study of family literacy.

Previous research (Weinberger, 1996) that focused on the roles of parents and siblings in helping younger family members to read found that younger siblings modelled their behaviour on their older brothers and sisters. An example of this was when younger children pretended to do homework alongside their older siblings. The three children in the present study had no such role models, as each was an only child within their families, although grandparents and other adults had played a part in their early literacy experiences. By including grandparents, parents and children in the study a retrospective view of literacy learning within the context of three different family traditions emerged. Memories of childhood provided a window on schooling over the past seventy years.

The three families were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the success of the children in school literacy formed the basis for exploring literacy traditions within their families. Secondly, the children's grandparents lived close by and were actively involved with their grandchildren's lives. They were in part responsible for the success of their grandchildren's literacy attainments at school and continued to enjoy mutually supportive roles within the families. At the time the study took place the three children Fiona, David and Harry were nine years old. They were already writers of narrative, prose and poetry. In my role as their teacher I was familiar with their schoolwork. I had already observed the earlier signs of success when they were younger. I expected to find literate, articulate relatives in the three families whose own narratives would affirm their literacy learning. The findings revealed a more complex network of support than I had imagined.

On the Margin

Within the research two individuals emerged as marginal figures in family literacy traditions. Firstly, there was Joe, paternal grandfather to Fiona and secondly, Bob who was Harry's father. There were similarities in their backgrounds. Both men had sons but no daughters and both were self-made businessmen coming from working class backgrounds. Bob had lived in a rural community all his life whereas Joe came originally from an industrial town. When asked, Joe could not recall either of his parents being interested in his

reading or schoolwork. Bob stated that no one in his family took interest in his reading when he was a child. In describing their schooling they told quite different stories that reflected the social climate of the times. Joe remembered punitive aspects of education. A rap across the knuckles with a ruler was given for untidy handwriting or insufficient work. It was a frequent occurrence. Summerfield (1987) describes schooling in Lancashire (Joe's home county) in the early part of the century. Many teachers taught with the cane. One respondent recalled the rigorous standards set by the teacher in a music lesson,

Now it's a little difficult the timing and the Welsh music and she ended up going round the class, right first one stand up, sing it. If they couldn't sing it they'd go and stand out at the front and they got the cane, and then the next one tried it and if they couldn't sing they'd to go to the front and they got the cane. Now she ended up with perhaps about twenty out of forty at the front, so then she went along them and the first one if he couldn't sing it he got the cane again, and stayed there - girls as well, it didn't matter, boys and girls it made no different. If the second one could sing it, it made no different he got the cane again anyway for being there. But then they could sit down, and this went on, you know, four or five times through until everybody could sing it. So it ended up you might have had the cane about five times before you ended up being able to sing, 'David of the White Rock' without making any mistakes, but everybody could sing it in the end.
(Summerfield, 1987, p.20)

Joe's recollections of his school days were similar to those of the other grandparents in the research. But classroom practice changed over a generation and Bob, Harry's father, described his schooling in negative terms but for different reasons. In earlier times he might have been a boy who received numerous raps across the knuckles. But as a pupil in the 1970s he spent time standing in the corridor for his misdemeanours. Bob later regretted his inattention to English at high school as he explained:

If you can write clearly and summarise what you want to put across, that it is really clever. I admire people who can do that. I go to these presentations and the people who are really interesting and keep your attention have written what they want to say on a side of A4.

Bob felt in some ways that he had wasted time at school but also that school was a waste of time. Gilbert (1997) draws attention to the divide between school success and the world of work. She states that reading and literacy are valued within a gendered world of school learning which girls appropriate and boys to some extent eschew. The 'real' world is one of work, being successful or appearing to know how to become successful. This is a 'man's world'.

Reading at Home and in the Community

Joe's recollections of homelife described a childhood between the two world wars. He was born in 1922, he remembered as a child seeing the collected works of Charles Dickens, '*leather bound and gold lettering*' that his family possessed. However, he could not recall there being any books for children in his home. The Central Office for Information (1944) reported on childhood reading experiences of grandparents at that time. More than half the respondents said that they recalled only a few books in their homes when they were children. Less than half had received any encouragement in their reading at home.

A second report (COI, 1948) described aspects of community literacy. The survey looked at leisure reading including the use of public libraries. The study found that less than 4% of children aged between five and seven years were ever taken to the local public library. Older children, those aged between eight to eleven years were given more opportunity to sample the delights of reading books because the figure increased to 34%. During the first half of the twentieth century the public library was not used as a resource for encouraging young children in their reading. But in a study of local literacy, Barton and Hamilton (1998) interviewed local people of Lancaster whose parents were born around the turn of the century. Their findings suggested that extensive use was made of local libraries at the beginning of the century and small private libraries existed from which books could be borrowed for a small charge. Newspapers played a significant role as reading material in family homes. Both local evening and morning national papers were taken. This finding supports an earlier survey (COI, 1948) which found that around 50% of children aged eleven or above read newspapers frequently.

In some respects the choice of leisure reading materials some fifty years ago is not so different from today. Magazines written for girls were popular amongst girls over the age of ten years. Moss (1989) highlights the marginal position of this particular literacy genre within the pedagogy of contemporary classrooms notwithstanding its long established role within the culture of reading amongst young girls and women. Millard (1997) found that over 70% of girls surveyed read 'teen culture' magazines. Despite its ageless popularity within the social context of girls' leisure reading the silent censure for this form of consumer reading attracts from educationalists has the effect of shutting down debate.

Fifty years ago reading patterns amongst older children revealed that boys chose to read magazines that centred on hobbies, much as they do today (COI, 1948). A contemporary perspective on boys reading choices revealed a concern with status; computer and football magazines were by far the most popular choices (Millard, 1998). Within the research both David and Harry, in some ways mirrored the contemporary tastes in their leisure time. David was an avid collector of history magazines, particularly about the military. Whilst Fiona and Harry enjoyed reading comics, popular magazines and newspapers. This

was a literacy activity that was notably absent in David's family. Literacy is a shared activity. For Eileen, Harry's mother it was Uncle Donald who took on the role of guiding and encouraging her in her efforts to read when she was a child. Christine, Fiona's mother recalled her elder sister reading storybooks to her and encouraging her to read when they were children. The social context of literacy was made manifest in the family/community sharing the task of its achievement.

Oral Literacy and School Literacy

Reading aloud becomes a bridge between orality and literacy (Barrs, 1992, p.19)

Adults who read to children use two sources of thematic information that of familiar vocal tones and that which refers to written patterns. In this way new patterns of written language are introduced. The essence of children's reading is the concern with narrative structure. The written text is somehow superseded by the pictorial text. Adult and child construct a fictive chain of possible events which open the verbal text to uncertainty and thereby opportunity. Reading becomes a tool for understanding the form and meanings of narratives. Re-reading favourite texts overlays each previous experience with new interpretations. Adult support ensures that: 'What the child can do in co-operation today, he can do alone tomorrow' (Vygotsky, 1962). The three children in the research Fiona, David and Harry recalled shared reading in their homes as part of their everyday lives.

Narrative Writing

Phillipa Pearce (1992) describes the act of writing as a creative process: 'the story is a child - my brain-child, my heart-child, the child of my imagination' (p.171). Narrative seems to return to childhood almost as though the acts of reading and writing are vehicles that prescribe the remembrance of self. Pearce (1992) draws upon contemporary literary critical theory to emphasise the autonomy of the text. Readers, young readers will make what they will of a text, it is not the business of the writer nor perhaps the teacher to draw too much interpretation from it. As Pearce (1992, p.172) succinctly states, '*the story should speak for itself*'. Her stance is one that cautions against the dissection of the pleasure of reading by attention to analytical skills. The core of literacy traditions in families is just this, it is the nurturing of absorption in a reading text. Pearce (1992) describes from a writer's viewpoint the necessary ingredients to please children in their reading. The three families in the study

had the necessary ingredients to persuade children to sit and listen, to read aloud, to read and share together.

Researching Grandparents

Joe and Mabel, Fiona's grandparents, had both worked to build up their own family business. Their family home adjoined the family business premises and Mabel had worked in the office 'doing the accounts'. She supported the family in her dual roles as a business partner and the home manager. A significant event in the life of this family occurred when their son Niall, who was a 'delicate' child with special educational needs was offered a residential place at a special school by the sea. Though Niall was seven years old he had already missed a substantial amount of his schooling. This was an opportunity for a better life. But the school was situated some two hundred miles away from the family home. Rather than send Niall away to school, Joe and Mabel sold their business and moved the family to be near the school. It proved to be beneficial to Niall's education, but for Keith their eldest son, who later was to become Fiona's father, this event changed his life. Uprooted from his grammar school and placed in what seemed to be an inferior high school he soon lost his enthusiasm for hard work and in Joe and Mabel's words, his academic progress 'collapsed'. Keith remembered the transition differently. He felt that he was struggling to keep pace with the high academic standards at his prestigious grammar school. He quickly came to enjoy the advantages of his new life in a popular holiday resort.

In the years of working to build up their business Joe had worked such long hours that he didn't have time to spend with his sons and left their upbringing 'to their mother', and this included the times spent in learning to read and write. The tradition of mothers as the guardians of family literacy through the generations is described elsewhere (Mace, 1998). In the past it was more common for mothers to be at home and so be on hand to tend to their children's developing reading and writing skills. However, the demands of domestic duties and larger families did not leave much time to attend to the developing literacy needs of young children. Older brothers or sisters would share in the task of helping children to read or reading to them. Mabel recalled how her two sisters would help her as a child when she was learning to read at home. But Joe could not recall anyone in his childhood home helping him.

Amy, Fiona's maternal grandmother talked at length about her own childhood spent with her own mother. Amy's father was in the Merchant Navy and only saw her a few times during her childhood. She too was an only child like Fiona. Although the focus of the research was literacy it became clear that narratives would enrich the research focus. This was particularly so when talking with the grandparents in the study. But it was more difficult to

'manage' grandparents. In the interviews they told family narratives perhaps for the first time. It was as though the meeting was an opportunity to speak in a way that it is only possible to speak to someone whom one doesn't know and will perhaps never see again. In this way the research is empowering for both interviewer and interviewee. Stuart (1993) states, the telling of a life story is an empowering experience. Amy, Fiona's maternal grandmother, spoke of how her mother would read to her each night, and of how she slept in her mother's bedroom in a small camp bed because she was 'nervous child and didn't like sleeping on her own'. Mother and daughter were very close 'like pals really' and it seemed that the significance of the routine bedtime story was an expression of this closeness. As a parent Amy remembered her daughters Maggie and Christine reading together. Maggie the elder child would help Christine to sound out letters of words. This was another instance of family literacy conducted within the lives of women and girls.

Discussion and Conclusions

In speaking about their lives family members described personal recollections of learning literacy. The central focus of the study was the group of three children, Fiona, David and Harry. The narratives of their grandparents were enriching in their vibrancy. Parents too recalled childhood memories of learning to read. Their midway stage in life reflected in their concerns for their children. In writing about these families I have had glimpses of my own past. I recalled myself as a child learning to read and later as a parent learning how children learnt to read. I was also the researcher chronologically aged somewhere between the parents in early middle age and the grandparents whose ages ranged from sixty to seventy years. I was also a teacher trying to step out of role for a brief time to capture some glimpses of literacy in families.

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